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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002605

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SUBJECT: NEW ISCI CHAIRMAN AMMAR AL-HAKIM UPDATES
AMBASSADOR ABOUT NATIONAL ELECTION, REGIONAL RELATIONS

REF: A. BAGHDAD 002386
IB. BAGHDAD 002288

Classified By: Acting Deputy Chief of Mission Gary A. Grappo for reason
s 1.4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In the Embassy's first meeting with Ammar al-Hakim since he was elected to succeed his father as the chairman of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), Ambassador Hill on September 23 stressed the U.S. commitment to transitioning from a military- to a civilian-led U.S. presence in Iraq, and to helping Iraq improve its regional relations. Ammar agreed with the Ambassador on the importance of holding the national election on time, but made clear that he supported a parliamentary hearing on the election commission to improve transparency and competency. Hakim said ISCI supports an open-list election in January. Hakim asked the United States to encourage Arab states to "calm" their attacks against electoral alliances to prevent parties from defensively reverting to sectarian politics. Hakim also noted that his rival cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, had moved beyond his "psychological problems" and is now focused on social work and his studies. END SUMMARY.

Appreciation for U.S. Condolences

¶2. (C) Ammar al-Hakim expressed appreciation for U.S. actions in response to the death of his father Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, especially Vice President Biden's condolence letter and Ambassador Hill's attendance of the mourning ceremony (ref A). Hakim said he feels a "great responsibility" in succeeding his father as ISCI chairman, given the challenges facing Iraq. Joining Hakim in the meeting were his younger brother Muhsin, Council of Representatives (COR) member Layla al-Khafaji, and the late Abd al-Aziz's chief of staff Haitham al-Husseini.

Security Agreement Signifies "End of Era"

¶3. (C) The Ambassador told Hakim that implementation of the Security Agreement (SA) is on schedule, to include the withdrawal of all U.S. combat troops by August 2010, and noted that we were making the transition from a military- to civilian-led U.S. presence and mission in Iraq. Hakim welcomed this reaffirmation, noting, however, that some were worried that U.S. attention to Iraq and to ISCI might be waning. As was the case under his father, ISCI would continue to seek good relations with the United States, Hakim said. He observed that the drawdown of U.S. forces would signal merely an end of an era, not the end of the bilateral relationship.

¶4. (C) Turning to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the potential for future attacks, Hakim judged that Iraqi security institutions remain "fragile," especially the intelligence services. He said an international tribunal is needed to investigate terrorist attacks inside Iraq.

¶5. (C) Hakim said he is concerned that the United States and Iraq are focusing on security at the expense of implementing the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) and working to remove Iraq from UNSC Chapter VII sanctions. Hakim said he hopes American and Iraqi societies can move closer together through, for example, university exchanges.

ISCI Seeking Regional Balance, Calm

¶6. (C) Hakim stressed the need to prevent neighboring states from competing for influence in Iraq. He asked the United States to help Iraq improve its connections especially with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, countries he called "pillars," so that Iraq can achieve "balance" in regional relations. (NOTE: Hakim's call for "balance" appears to refer to deemphasizing Iraq's relations with Iran. END NOTE.) The Ambassador replied that the United States was committed to helping Iraq improve its regional relations.

Domestic Politics

¶7. (C) Hakim said that the INA is attempting to form a "national list" (ref B). Hakim said that he worried that as the January election nears, Arab media will try to portray the INA as a "sectarian" (i.e. Shia) alliance, which would have the effect of pushing electoral groups back toward sectarian politics. Hakim asked that the United States urge Arab states to "calm" the attacks in the media against the INA and other electoral lists.

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¶8. (C) The Ambassador told Hakim that the United States will remain neutral during the election and not support any specific alliance. The U.S. goal is for a credible, timely election, after which the winners govern inclusively and the losers accept defeat responsibly, the Ambassador said. He stressed the importance for the COR to quickly decide upon an election law. Hakim agreed that the national election "must not be one day late" and said ISCI favors an open-list election law. He further noted that after its poor showing in the January 2009 provincial elections, ISCI had accepted the results and immediately congratulated the winners, despite concerns about IHEC's performance.

¶9. (C) The Ambassador urged the COR to remain focused on the election law, and not become distracted by questioning IHEC or battling over Kirkuk. Hakim reiterated that ISCI favors "hearings" in the COR on IHEC but opposes holding a no-confidence vote against any of its members. Examining IHEC before the election will enhance transparency and will increase the election's legitimacy, including making it easier for the losers to accept the results, Hakim reasoned. He encouraged the United States and the UN to help explain IHEC's work to the Iraqi people. Hakim then warned that "if Kirkuk explodes" Iraq would have grave problems. Therefore, ISCI is encouraging compromise, he said. On addressing the longer term question of Kirkuk and Article 140, Hakim agreed that Kirkuk should have a "special status."

Muqtada al-Sadr Past "Psychological Problems"

¶10. (C) Asked for his assessment of the status of Muqtada al-Sadr, Hakim said he understands Sadr has gotten over his "psychological problems," is "feeling much better," and is now focusing on his family, social work, and his studies. (Comment: Hakim appeared to be referring to Sadr's earlier preoccupation with video games. End Comment.) Hakim said Sadr had been under great pressure as a young man following the violent deaths of his father and brother, which pushed him to take "incorrect decisions." Hakim commented he always sympathized with him given that Sadr's father and brothers

were murdered when he was young, thrusting him to leadership without competent advisors or adequate preparation. Hakim noted that Muqtada's father, Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, had been at odds with the Najaf clerics (hawza), which fed Muqtada's sense of isolation.

¶11. (C) Hakim said he had met Sadr years ago in Najaf and that Sadr had visited the ailing Abd al-Aziz in Tehran. Hakim said his brother Muhsin al-Hakim had recently seen Sadr in the hospital in Tehran.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Within 24 hours, ISCI's Arabic and English websites posted notice of Ammar al-Hakim's meeting with the Ambassador, indicating a clear desire to highlight ongoing engagement with the United States. Given Hakim's late father had a close personal relationship with senior U.S. officials, Ammar probably will seek to build on that history and might be sensitive to signs that ISCI's voice receives less attention. After the January national election, ISCI is likely to remain an important influence here, whether by running ministries or acting as a check on its rival Sadrists Trend. As in 2006, an ISCI member is likely to emerge as a strong contender for prime minister. END COMMENT.

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